

How America



Organized crime? Mafia? A lot of people, including J. Edgar Hoover, said it was mere folklore—until one day in 1957 an alert New York state trooper set up a roadblock in a small town. What followed was low comedy with high consequences.

The day was mild for November; the blanket of sodden clouds promised rain. By noon the hilltop estate was fragrant with the prehistoric aroma of roasting meat. The visitors, dressed in silk suits, white-on-white shirts, gleaming shoes, and lush camel's hair coats, looked distinctly out of place in the tiny upstate New York hamlet of Apalachin. "A meeting of George Rafts," an observer would note.

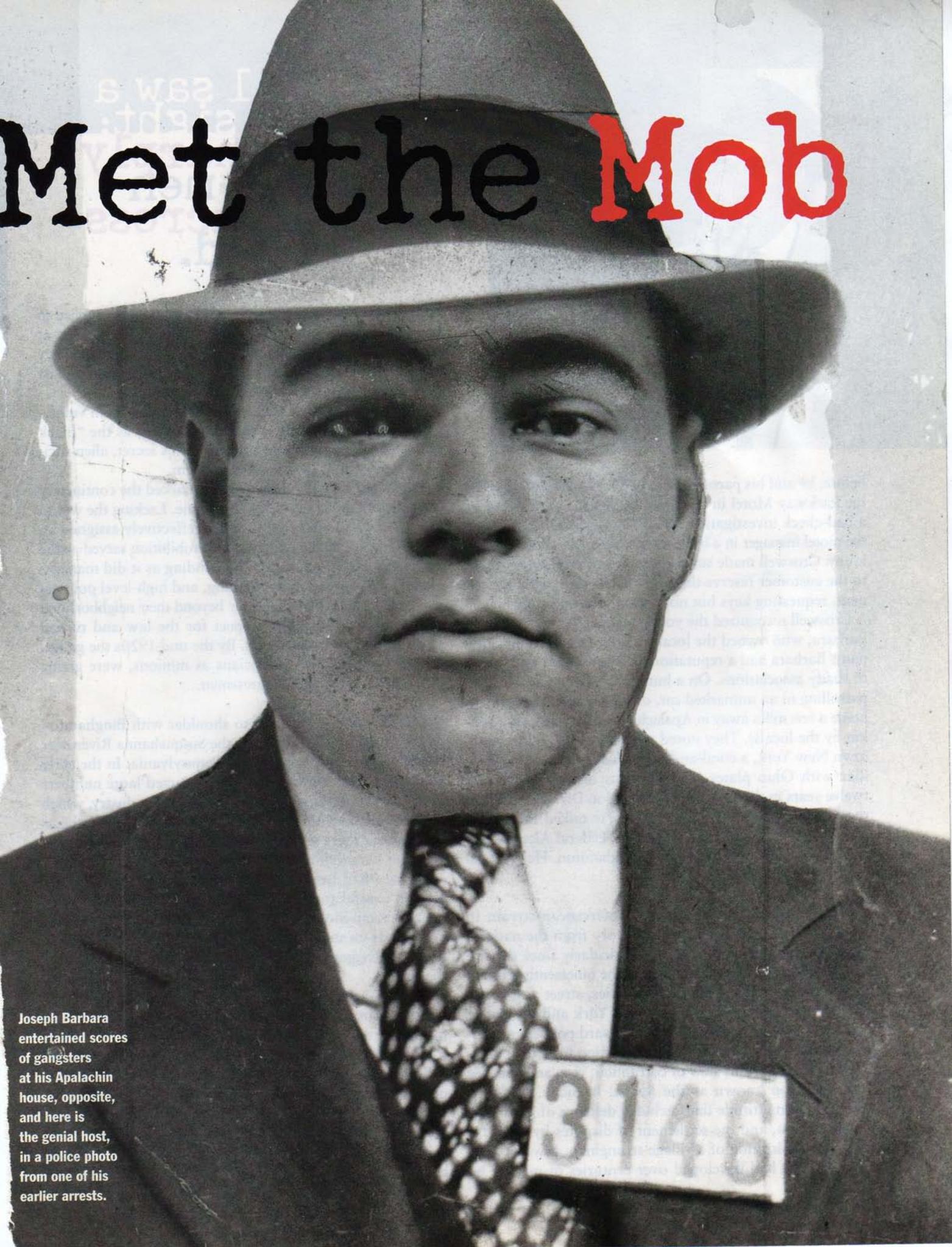
The dozens of men standing around the barbecue were preparing to feast. A week before, their host had ordered \$432 worth of fancy steaks, veal chops, and hams from Armour & Company in Binghamton. The 220-pound shipment had to be sent in specially from Chicago.

As the men circulated and renewed acquaintances, a car containing two police officers and two U.S. Treasury agents rolled up the dirt road toward the open compound. Neither the lawmen nor the houseguests realized that the events about to unfold that day in 1957 would stamp the name Apalachin on the history of crime in America and shape for all time the public's perception of the underworld.

Sgt. Edgar D. Croswell was a tall, severe forty-two-year-old State Police veteran. Divorced, he lived in the trooper barracks and devoted himself to his work. He was a meticulous and thorough investigator. The day

BY JACK KELLY

Met the Mob



Joseph Barbara entertained scores of gangsters at his Apalachin house, opposite, and here is the genial host, in a police photo from one of his earlier arrests.



Croswell saw a strange sight: a dozen sharply dressed men running across a field.

before, he and his partner, Vincent Vasisko, had stopped by the Parkway Motel in the town of Vestal to follow up on a bad-check investigation. While Croswell conferred with the motel manager in a back room, a young man entered the lobby. Croswell made sure he was out of sight and listened to the customer reserve three rooms for that night and the next, requesting keys but not naming the occupants.

Croswell recognized the young man as the son of Joseph Barbara, who owned the local Canada Dry Bottling Company. Barbara had a reputation as a bootlegger and a man of shady associations. On a hunch, Croswell and Vasisko, patrolling in an unmarked car, drove past Barbara's lavish home a few miles away in Apalachin (pronounced Ap-a-LAY-kin by the locals). They noted two cars unusual for small-town New York, a coral-and-pink Lincoln and a blue Cadillac with Ohio plates. Croswell, his instincts honed by twelve years in the Criminal Investigation Division, checked the Barbara place again after dark. He talked the matter over with two investigators from the Federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division in nearby Binghamton. He resolved to inquire further in the morning.

Gangsterism has added a subterranean stream to the course of American history from the nation's earliest days, and more particularly since the rise of urban society in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the brash saloon culture of the cities, street and youth gangs, like the Five Pointers of New York and the Valley Gang in Chicago, became allied with ward politicians, canvassing for votes in exchange for protection from the police.

One element in this stew of corruption, vice, and violence was a faction known as the Mafia. In Sicily the word referred to an attitude that included defiance of authority, loyalty to kin, and the settlement of disputes by vendetta or by the arbitration of a village strongman. It was a state of mind that had developed over centuries of misrule by

Spanish and Bourbon conquerors. *Mafia* was also applied to bands of brigands that terrorized local peasants, at first at the behest of landowners, then for their own benefit. They established a solid base of power in Sicily during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

In America, Mafiosi mainly extorted money from vulnerable Italian immigrants, a technique known as the "black hand." The public was suspicious of this secret, alien society but saw no cause for general alarm.

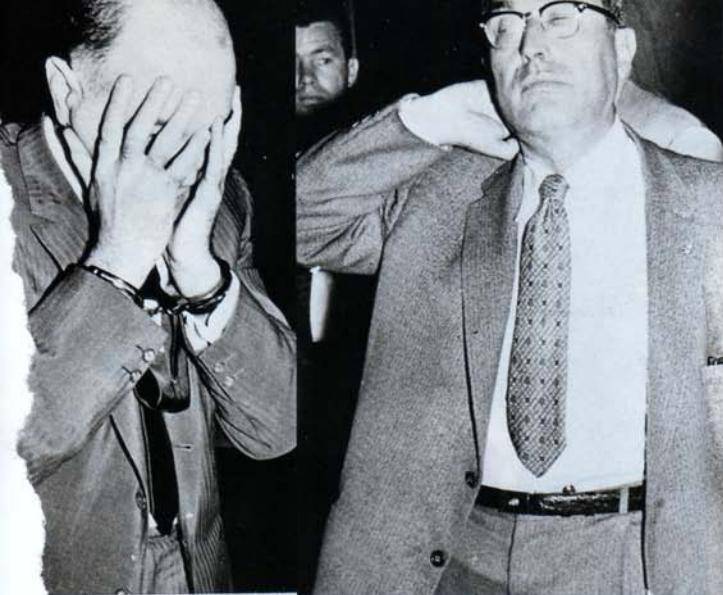
The onset of Prohibition in 1920 marked the continental divide in the history of organized crime. Lacking the will to enforce the Volstead Act, Congress effectively assigned an entire industry to the underworld. Prohibition served as the gangsters' higher education, demanding as it did management skills, cooperation, planning, and high-level political contacts. It moved the gangs far beyond their neighborhood haunts. It eroded public respect for the law and turned street thugs into millionaires. By the mid-1920s the gangs, rather than serve the politicians as minions, were giving orders to mayors and congressmen.

Endicott sits shoulder to shoulder with Binghamton and Johnson City along the Susquehanna River near New York's border with Pennsylvania. In the early decades of this century, the town attracted large numbers of Italian immigrants with jobs in its shoe industry, which included the big Endicott Johnson plant. One of the Sicilians who landed there was Joseph Barbara, in whose activities Sergeant Croswell took such an interest.

Barbara had been born in Castellammare del Golfo, a Sicilian coastal town that gave rise to an entire clique of the American mob. He came to America in 1921. His several arrests on suspicion of murder in the early 1930s mark him as a trigger-puller during the underworld turmoil of the time.

Barbara's record had been pretty clean since 1933, but Croswell suspected he was using his soft drink and beer operation to mask involvement in illicit alcohol. "Somehow I felt he was the big mobster in our area," Croswell said.

Barbara was known locally as a businessman with connections. He gave heavily to charity. He lived in an eighteen-room quarry-stone house. The Endicott police chief had personally recommended him for a pistol permit. His franchise to distribute Canada Dry soft drinks and Gibbons beer was a lucrative one. During 1956 Barbara, at fifty-one,



Sergeant Croswell, far left, and a few of the suspects brought low by him and *timor rusticus*: Natale Evola (trafficker in drugs and shoulder pads), Joseph Profaci (the "Olive Oil King"), Vito Genovese, and Paul Castellano.



had been weakened by heart disease. His son Joseph, Jr., was overseeing the Canada Dry plant while another son attended college.

Barbara's background was typical of many of those who gathered in Apalachin that day: early brushes with violence and rumrunning, a later pose of respectability buttressed by an interest in one or more legitimate businesses. It was a path that paralleled the evolution of the underworld as a whole. The twenties and early thirties were marked by bloodshed as Irish, Jewish, and Italian gangs fought over the bonanza of Prohibition. The violence peaked in 1931, when Salvatore Maranzano scrambled to the top of the heap in New York and declared himself "boss of all bosses."

Maranzano was the leader of the Castellammarese faction, which included the gang leaders Joseph Bonanno and Joseph Profaci of Brooklyn and Buffalo's Stefano Magadino. Maranzano, who spoke six languages and was an avid student of the works of Julius Caesar, viewed himself in the tradition of the old-style Mafia strongmen. He envisioned a gangland dominated by Italians, in which territorial bosses, their followers ordered on the pattern of Roman legions, would maintain a stable realm, honoring their emperor.

Maranzano's plan to organize the gangs into "regimes" of "soldiers" headed by "capos" has long outlived him, as has his arrangement of New York's Italian gangs into five "families." Maranzano himself paid grievously for his ambition.

His Cassius was Salvatore Lucania, better known as Lucky Luciano. The young, forward-thinking Luciano saw the advantage in alliances with non-Italian gangs and the need for a high-level "commission" of gang bosses to replace violence with arbitration; the disputes that arose in a world without written contracts perpetually threatened underworld stability. This rational New World view clashed with Maranzano's notions. Each man plotted against the

other. In September 1931, as Vincent ("Mad Dog") Coll was arriving at the New York Central Building on Park Avenue to lay ambush for Luciano, killers hired by Luciano and disguised as policemen walked into Maranzano's office there and left him lying dead.

The early years of the Depression saw a continued shake-out in gangland. Other recalcitrant mobsters—Jack ("Legs") Diamond, Dutch Schultz, and Coll himself—died in the bloodshed, but Luciano's ideas soon caught on. By the mid-1930s Luciano, along with his boyhood pal Meyer Lansky and the veteran gangster Frank Costello, had brought a relative peace to the underworld that would last two decades. Says the historian John H. Davis, author of *Mafia Dynasty*: "What Luciano accomplished was to Americanize and democratize the old Sicilian Mafia," turning it into "a huge, and fearsome, moneymaking machine."

At noon on Thursday, November 14, Sergeant Croswell, Trooper Vasisko, and the two Alcohol Tax men drove up to the Barbara home to pursue what they continued to think was a bootlegging investigation. They found a number of vehicles parked next to Barbara's four-car garage. As they wrote down license numbers, a dozen men strolled from behind the building, where they had been eating sirloin sandwiches, and stared at the officers. A few more broke into an anxious trot as they headed for the big ranch-style house.

Croswell and his men started to leave, but their curiosity was further piqued by the sight of another almost two dozen cars parked in a field behind Barbara's horse barn. What was going on here? They retreated down the hill to an intersection a half-mile from the house and stopped to talk over the situation. Because a bridge was out, the road past Barbara's place was a dead end.

Croswell decided to set up a roadblock and check anyone

Things were out of hand. If Costello and Anastasia could be shot, no one was safe.

who left. He sent Vasisko and one of the federal men back for reinforcements.

If the public was primed for the revelations that would surface at Apalachin, it was mainly due to groundwork laid seven years earlier. In 1950 Estes Kefauver, a freshman senator from Tennessee with a nose for publicity, decided that probing a nationwide criminal conspiracy would further the public good even as it boosted his own political fortunes. The Kefauver Committee traveled to fourteen cities during 1950 and 1951, compiling voluminous amounts of testimony, fact, and opinion. The senators uncovered bookmaking, numbers rackets, and illicit casinos everywhere they went, and with the vice came the inevitable political corruption.

The larger issue that emerged from the hearings was the existence of a syndicate that controlled criminal activity across the country. But Attorney General J. Howard McGrath saw no evidence of a centralized conspiracy, and neither did J. Edgar Hoover; the FBI director insisted that the Mafia was pure fantasy.

Kefauver wavered at first, but in the end he declared flatly, "A national crime syndicate does exist in the United States of America. . . ." The mob was, in fact, a "second government" of pervasive power. "The Mafia . . . is no fairy tale."

The fifties were the golden age of organized crime. Mobsters had invested their Prohibition lucre in gambling enterprises; casinos in Las Vegas and Havana promised steady streams of cash. The mob had leveraged its muscle through labor and industrial rackets in fields like trucking, construction, and apparel, extracting a private tax on a wide range of products and services. Narcotics importation yielded further treasure. Political contacts from the twenties and thirties had matured: Mob lawyers had become judges, judges senators. The underworld had enjoyed its pax Luciano for more than twenty years. Two shootings would break the peace and set the stage for Apalachin.

In the 1940s Virgil W. Peterson, head of the Chicago Crime Commission, had called Frank Costello "the lord of the underworld of the entire United States." Born Francesco Castiglia, Costello had turned a fascination with coin-operated devices into a slot-machine empire. His notoriety hastened his downfall. After being raked across the coals by Kefauver, Costello became a sitting duck for government prosecutors and served more than a year in jail for contempt. In the spring of 1957 he was out on appeal and still



trying to keep his hand on the tiller of his criminal conglomerate. As such he represented a threat to Vito Genovese, another long-time gang leader, who had taken charge of Costello's crime family two years earlier.

On the night of May 2, 1957, as Costello entered his Central Park West apartment building, a man leaped at him, shouted "This is for you, Frank," and shot him in the head. Costello dropped, his assassin ran.

The bullet, though, had only creased Costello's skull. When confronted with his alleged assailant, Vincent ("The Chin") Gigante, Costello claimed he had seen nothing. But he heeded the eloquent message and retired from his underworld business.

At Apalachin, Croswell was now watching a strange sight: a dozen sharply dressed men running from Barbara's house across an open field, heading for a stand of pine trees. At the same time, the small truck of a local fishmonger that had been leaving Barbara's property suddenly turned and rushed back to the house. The driver, Bartholo Guccia, a retired Endicott Johnson tanner with a criminal record and, like Barbara, a Castellammare native, later explained that he had returned to clarify a fish order, not to raise an alarm.

Then a 1957 Chrysler Imperial approached the road-block. Croswell ordered the car to stop and asked the men inside to identify themselves and submit to a search. Among the occupants was Vito Genovese. Croswell knew the name; the newspapers called him "King of the Rackets." He was one of the most powerful gang leaders in the country.

A week shy of sixty at the time, Genovese had paid his



Strong and stronger warnings spurred the conference: Frank Costello, shot but not killed, is escorted by a detective from Roosevelt Hospital, and Albert Anastasia lies dead on a barbershop floor.

gangland dues. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Luciano had supplied the underworld's organizational acumen, Lansky the brains, and Costello the political connections, Genovese's department had been the muscle. Early photos show him with a square countenance of concentrated ferocity, and even as a grandfather he retained a face that could frighten. In 1957 Genovese was angling for undisputed sway in the New York underworld.

Once Costello had been scared off, the major obstacle to Genovese's hegemony was another mob leader, Albert Anastasia, who had also come up through the mayhem department of the business. Anastasia, who ran a Brooklyn-based Mafia family, exerted an iron control over New York's waterfront, and his gang had its fingers on a majority of the imports into the U.S. East Coast.

Anastasia's nickname—"Il Terremoto," the Earthquake—gives a clue to his disposition. In 1952 he watched a young Brooklyn man named Arnold Schuster being congratulated by police officers on television. Schuster had spotted and turned in the bank robber and prison escapee Willie Sutton. "I can't stand squealers!" Anastasia supposedly bellowed. A few days later Schuster was shot three times in the head as he walked home from work.

Such antics raised questions in the underworld about Anastasia's stability. His alliance with Costello made him a threat to Genovese. Also, he had lately been trying to force an opening into the lucrative Havana casino business that Lansky and others gangsters had neatly divided up.

Anastasia paid for these sins in a spectacular way. Three weeks before the Apalachin meeting he sat down in chair number four of a barbershop in the Park Sheraton Hotel on New York's Seventh Avenue and asked for a trim. Two masked men entered and started shooting. Il Terremoto heaved himself from the chair, breaking the footrest. He lurched toward the image of his killers in the mirror.

Half the shots went wild before one finally caught him in the head.

Because the gun is the ultimate source of power in the underworld, competition always has the potential of exploding into unrestrained violence. Such a danger was now at hand, and there was a consensus among mob bosses that a meeting was needed to clear the air.

Genovese wanted to hold the conference in Chicago, neutral ground for the contentious New York gangs. "Big Steve" Magadino,

the Castellemmarese boss of Buffalo and a man of considerable clout among the mob's top echelons, convinced him that the Barbara estate would be a more secluded site. The Mafia Commission had held a meeting in nearby Binghamton the year before with no disturbances. For Magadino the 1957 conclave was a chance to demonstrate his influence and further boost his prestige. Chicago mob boss Sam Giancana was later heard on a wiretap chewing out Magaddino for the fiasco. "I hope you're satisfied," he said. "Sixty-three of our top guys made by the cops."

Magaddino replied, "I gotta admit you were right, Sam. It never would have happened in your place."

Indeed, the carefully planned event was now going terribly wrong. One of the enduring questions about the Apalachin incident is why these men, veterans of bloody mob wars and of numerous encounters with the law, panicked. They were committing no crime; the police never closed in. Maybe the unfamiliar wide-open spaces threw them off. Maybe the dynamics of the crowd took over. Whatever the reason, they ran.

Croswell knew now that he had uncovered something big. As additional troopers arrived, he sent them to track down the men who had scurried into the woods. Other officers helped ferry the carloads of gangsters to the station. After the first flurry the participants of the thwarted meeting tried to exit a few at a time. Each car was detained as it left.

In one was Joe Profaci, the "Olive Oil King" and top man in one of the five New York families. Another held Carlo Gambino, whom Genovese had installed as head of Anastasia's faction, a reward to Gambino for betraying his boss.

Croswell's men picked up some of the nation's most notorious hoodlums in humbling circumstances. The long-time Brooklyn mob boss Joe Bonanno was nabbed in a cornfield. He would later claim that it wasn't him at all but someone who happened to have his driver's license. The Tampa king-

The Kefauver Show

The mob gave the nation its first major television event

pin Santo Trafficante, Jr., was more at home in the nightclubs of Havana, where he played a key role in the mob's gambling empire, than in the dank woods of upstate New York. He emerged from the woods with a couple of confederates only to see a State Police car approaching. The group turned tail; the troopers fired several warning shots; the gangsters gave up.

Police took all the detainees to the substation in nearby Vestal. "We gave them a rough time at the station house," Croswell said. "But we couldn't even make them commit disorderly conduct there." The gangsters had to empty their pockets and take off their shoes. Police found no guns or contraband on any of the participants. The men did carry a great deal of cash, a total of around three hundred thousand dollars (one man, who had a roll worth close to ten thousand, listed his occupation as "unemployed").

The final tally wasn't complete until one o'clock the next morning, an hour after the last of those who had run for the woods was brought in from the rain. "One by one we rounded them up," Croswell said, "bedraggled, soaking wet, and tired." He added, "There are no sidewalks in the woods."

Sixty-five gangsters were taken at the roadblock or in the surrounding area, and speculation placed as many as forty more men on the attendance list. Barbara's house was never searched; any who did not flee could have waited out the raid inside. About the reaction of those nabbed, Croswell noted, "These guys are never indignant." All of them answered questions politely and left the station quietly.

By the time Croswell processed the last of the men, he was being swamped by calls from reporters. The following day headlines blossomed in newspapers throughout the country. Here at last was proof of what Kefauver had warned about. Here was the "Grand Council" of the Mafia, the nerve center of crime in America. The enemy had finally been flushed into the open.

The police were immediately excoriated for releasing the biggest catch of mobsters in history. Croswell's critics ignored the fact that the men, none of whom was a wanted fugitive, were peacefully assembled on private property. The police action was itself of questionable legality, since there was no legitimate cause for suspicion.

Almost all the men stated that they had dropped by to pay a sick call on Barbara, that their simultaneous arrival on a Thursday morning had been sheer coincidence. John C. Montana, a taxi-company owner and former city councilman from Buffalo, was one of the few to give a more complete explanation. He later testified that he had been on his

Sen. Estes Kefauver had warned the American public of a national crime syndicate several years before it surfaced at Apalachin. During his committee's climactic hearings in New York City in March of 1951, the impact of his investigation was vastly magnified by a novel medium.

The sale of television receivers had boomed during the previous year; the proportion of New York City-area homes with sets had jumped from 29 percent to 51 percent. The hearings, broadcast live, became the first major television event. Viewers looked on by the tens of millions. New York's Consolidated Edison had to add an extra generator to power all the sets. Stores were deserted during "Kefauver hours" and swamped when the committee took its noon



During the organized crime hearings, television supplanted movies even in movie theaters.

way to Pittstown, Pennsylvania, when his car's brakes had failed in Ithaca. He thought Barbara or someone at his house could help fix them. While drinking tea in Barbara's home, he had noticed "some kind of party" going on but didn't inquire about it. At the shout of "Roadblock!" he ran for the woods. He explained, ". . . it was just human nature that I would say to myself: what am I doing here?"

Others were more accustomed to police roundups. Only 9

recess. "Never before had the attention of the nation been riveted so completely on a single matter," *Life* magazine said.

Kefauver, as the low-key moderator of the show, leaped from obscurity to national prominence overnight, the first television politician. He stage-managed the production well, calling to the stand the talkative mobster Willie Moretti, who, to general laughter, declared, "Jeez, everything is a racket today." Virginia Hill, erstwhile mistress of the Las Vegas racketeer Bugsy Siegel, had little to say about crime in America, but she acted the exemplary moll before the cameras.

A conspiracy had to have a "Mr. Big," and central casting couldn't have provided a better candidate than the dapper Frank Costello. After his lawyer objected to the Cyclopsian stare of the camera, the television audience saw only Costello's hands, their nervous ballet conveying a message of evasion and guilt. He insisted that his business interests, which, in addition to oil and Wall Street real estate, had once included the manufacture of Kewpie dolls, were legitimate; Costello had said earlier he was "cleaner than 99 per cent of New Yorkers." Kefauver, himself a horseplayer, pressed the "Prime Minister" for answers about his gambling empire. Costello finally walked out.

Reaction to the hearings far exceeded Kefauver's expectations. He received glowing letters from citizens by the tens of thousands, congratulating him for exposing "these carrion." The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences awarded the show an Emmy. Kefauver found himself on the cover of *Time* as his supporters ballyhooed his presidential prospects.

In 1956 the senator rode his notoriety to a vice-presidential nomination. His committee's fifteen months of work, though, yielded almost no legislative or policy prescriptions. Kefauver would claim that his most important function was as a Cassandra, alerting the public to the hidden menace of the mob.

Critics later took Kefauver to task for alarmism and oversimplification. "The committee unquestionably exaggerated the degree of centralization within the underworld," says the Kefauver scholar William H. Moore. In the end, rather than leave the country with a deeper understanding of organized crime, the Kefauver hearings served as a prototype of the drama-laden televised investigation that has become a staple of the political scene.

—J.K.

of those captured had no record. The remainder boasted more than 275 arrests among them, 100 convictions. Their sheets contained busts for gambling, narcotics, weapons violations, bootlegging, and union rackets.

The list of attendees gave a snapshot of the underworld of the time. The mob was aging. Al Capone had reached the pinnacle of power while still in his twenties. The men at Apalachin were survivors, wily veterans of Prohibition,

many of them in their fifties and sixties.

The meeting was emblematic of the ascendancy of the Italian gangs in postwar organized crime. About half of the guests were natives of southern Italy or Sicily; the rest had been born in America of Italian heritage. Apalachin also illustrated the degree to which kinship formed a glue that held the underworld together—twenty-five of those picked up were related to one or more of the other guests—and provided a clue to the movement of the mob into legitimate business. The garment trade was the most common occupation detainees gave to police. State investigators reported that Natale Evola, a Brooklyn cousin of Joe Barbara's wife, "is believed to exercise control over the shoulder pad industry." He was later indicted as a major narcotics dealer. Eleven men listed their occupation as olive oil and cheese importation; others operated bars and restaurants, beer distributorships, and funeral homes.

While Apalachin was the most famous mob convention ever held, it was far from the first. What made Apalachin different from the earlier gatherings was its wholesale discovery. "Secrecy," Elias Canetti declares, "lies at the very core of power." Apalachin set in motion events that would gradually strip the underworld of much of its secrecy. That was what made the event a turning point and in many senses a high-water mark for the mob.

"Apalachin was of enormous importance," says the veteran mob watcher Nicholas Pileggi, author of *Wiseguys: Life in a Mafia Family*. "It proved that this wasn't the fantasy that many had thought. It made it harder for the lawyers and apologists to deny the existence of organized crime. After Apalachin the mob's political support began to crack. Gangsters are still active today in hijacking, loan-sharking, and other activities; the difference is that they've lost the official clout. They no longer appoint judges or state senators."

The power of the gang bosses rested on *rispetto*, the mixture of respect and fear that the old Mafia dons had employed to further their extortions. Ridicule was a peril. The opera buffa of Apalachin made Vito Genovese a laughingstock in the underworld. His fortunes never recovered. Seventeen months after the meeting, the government hit him with a fifteen-year sentence for conspiracy to distribute narcotics. He died in jail ten years later.

In 1957 organized crime was suddenly news. Each of the Apalachin participants became the focus of publicity and potential official action on his home turf. Attendance at the meeting was taken as proof of involvement in a malignant conspiracy. The public demanded to know why this "second government," now no longer invisible, was allowed to



exist. The authorities began to dig for answers.

The New York legislature assigned a watchdog committee to look into the matter. Grand juries probed for wrongdoing. Paul Castellano, the chauffeur, brother-in-law, and eventual successor to Carlo Gambino, served seven months for his silence before a New York City panel. Liquor and immigration authorities began to examine participants. Joe Barbara, plagued by health problems, never testified about the meeting, but he lost his pistol permit and his beer license and soon after sold both his house and business. When he died in 1959, only four of the hordes of "well-wishers" from two years earlier made it to his funeral.

On the federal level Apalachin came under the magnifying glass of a Senate committee chaired by John McClellan of Arkansas. The Senate Rackets Committee, as it was known, had been digging up dirt on mob infiltration of labor unions for nine months before Apalachin. Twenty-two of the delegates to Apalachin had union or labor-management ties. The hearings were driven by the group's chief counsel, Robert Kennedy. Genovese appeared before the panel wearing amber-shaded glasses and took the Fifth Amendment more than 150 times. McClellan's investigation proved to be an important step toward cleaning up mob-dominated unions.

J. Edgar Hoover understood that Apalachin made a mockery of his long-held position that no Mafia existed in America. A few days in the wake of Apalachin, Hoover set

Apalachin made
Vito Genovese
an underworld
laughingstock.
His fortunes
never recovered.

up a "Top Hoodlum Program," using the bureau to consolidate information on leading gangsters.

Various explanations have been put forth as to why Hoover demonstrated such a blind spot when it came to gangland realities, including a theory that the mob was blackmailing him. It's more likely that Hoover's reasoning was closer to what he so often stated: a notion that crime was a local problem. He told the Kefauver committee that if state and local laws were properly enforced, gambling would be eliminated "within forty-eight hours." Having kept his agency clear of the debacle of Prohibition, Hoover had long preached against turning the FBI into a national police force.

Hoover's instincts as a bureaucrat told him that effective action against organized crime meant cooperation with other federal agencies, a prospect he loathed. It also meant diverting resources from his obsessive hunt for domestic Communists. Whatever the reason, even after Apalachin, Hoover continued to drag his feet on organized crime. He



By the time Barbara died in 1959, the mob so fascinated the public that his home became a tourist attraction; *Life* magazine took a look, and pronounced his living room "costly but tasteless."

squashed a Bureau report that detailed the history of the underworld because it admitted the existence of a syndicate. In 1959 the Bureau's New York office still had four hundred agents assigned to domestic security details and only four looking into the mob.

Robert Kennedy lambasted the Eisenhower administration that same year for its failure to prosecute gang bosses. "The proof is the Apalachin convention," he said. "Sixty top gangsters were there, but no local, state, or federal officer knew about it. It was discovered only by chance. . . ."

Hoover's views began to shift even before Kennedy took over the Justice Department, and by 1961 he had plunged into the war on gangsterism with the zeal of a convert.

Convinced by Apalachin, Robert Kennedy remained an intrepid foe of the mob during his tenure as Attorney General. Insisting that the government needed to attack organized crime "with weapons and techniques as effective as their own," he pushed five anti-mob bills through Congress in 1961 and more than tripled the size of the department's organized-crime section. Kennedy's approach was all action. "Don't define it," he said, "do something about it." By 1963 the government had indicted more than six hundred organized-crime figures.

That same year a portly man of fifty-eight with an iron gray crew cut, a gangster for thirty-six years, went before McClellan's committee and became the first insider to sing publicly about the mob. This was Joe Valachi, a soldier in Genovese's gang who believed that his boss had betrayed him. Valachi became the Boswell of the Mafia, confirming much of what was already suspected, putting together the bricks of the story with the mortar of terminology and anecdote.

One of the secrets that Valachi confirmed was that mobsters never used the term *Mafia*. Instead they talked vaguely of *cosa nostra*, "our thing." FBI agents liked this. They turned the reference into a proper name, La Cosa Nostra, transformed it into an acronym, LCN, and thereby saved face for their director. There was, as Hoover had always claimed, no *Mafia*.

Apalachin also passed into the national vocabulary as a synonym for the underworld. Newspaper columnists referred to mobsters as "the Apalachin boys." Every subsequent gathering of gangsters was inevitably labeled a "little Apalachin."

Apalachin won Sergeant Croswell high praise for his diligence and established him as an organized-crime expert. He toured the nation talking about the underworld. After retiring from the State Police as a captain in 1966, he helped investigate corruption in the New York carting industry, and during the 1970s he served as head of the state's Organized Crime Task Force.

The names of Apalachin's attendees—Genovese, Gambino, Profaci, and Bonanno—became touchstones of organized crime. Carlo Gambino rose to become gangland's big cheese. His successor, Paul Castellano, who also enjoyed a steak sandwich at Barbara's home that day, was among a bevy of mob leaders who in 1985 were indicted under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act. Their crime was membership in the Mafia Commission itself, the once-secret Grand Council, whose membership changes were now reported routinely in *The New York Times*. When the conspirators were duly convicted and sentenced to hundred-year terms, Castellano wasn't around to join them; he had been shot down in front of his favorite New York steakhouse, a victim of his ambitious successor, John Gotti.

By the mid-1990s Vito Genovese's outfit, which could boast Lucky Luciano among its succession of leaders, had passed into the hands of a man who prosecutors alleged had become the dean of mobsters. Convicted in 1997 for racketeering and conspiracy to murder, he was none other than Vincent ("The Chin") Gigante, the onetime boxer whose 1957 attempt to plug Frank Costello was a major item on the Apalachin agenda.

In spite of the many revelations since Apalachin, the exact nature of the underworld remains elusive. Like the blind men with their elephant, observers perceive an organized crime of their own construction. Government officials find a second government. Law enforcement people see a para-military structure not unlike their own. Experts draw up organization charts with rigid chains of command. Reformers find corrupt politicians, nativists ethnic conspirators, moralists sinners.

None of the models exactly fits what Meyer Lansky's biographer Robert Lacey calls "the confused, fluid, and essentially entrepreneurial character of most criminal activity." In a sense Apalachin left a false impression of a distinct and easily definable mob ruled from the top. It fixed in the public mind the image of shady men meeting to direct a vast conspiracy. If that picture had been accurate, perhaps we would not still be wrestling with a stubborn organized-crime problem more than forty years after the event. In reality the underworld, with its matrix of personal influence, blood loyalties, intimidation, ad hoc enterprise, and political connections, defies both categorical description and easy remedy. ★

Jack Kelly's latest crime novel, Line of Sight, will be published in September (www.jackkellybooks.com).